



RANTS & RAVES

While Mel Croucher watches his time on this mortal coil ebb away on the progress bar of life, Simon Edwards reveals how naked mud-wrestling made him realise that PDAs were passé

LINE DANCING



MEL CROUCHER RANTS

My addiction began one fateful evening when, after tea and compulsory prayers, I defragmented a hard disk for the first time. I can remember clearly how I became mesmerised, watching the coloured squares shuffling over the screen as the progress bar crept towards completion. I grew so concerned as to how the irremovable clusters sorted themselves out from the corrupted blocks and unwritten data that I kept watching all night in case I missed something. By morning I had forgotten what I had been working on, and I never did remember.

Several years later, designers started showing similar little progress bars on their web pages. These were meant to let me know how much more tedium I would have to endure before the page loaded, but I soon found watching the progress bar was more entertaining than the end result. I think it was around 1991 that Apple launched QuickTime, and I became fascinated by its countdown indicator, as opposed to the crummy audio-visual content itself.

When Microsoft joined in with Windows Media Player, I knew I was doomed. I could now customise the progress bar, so that every video I watched and each song I played was accompanied by an animated line at the bottom of

my screen, determinedly progressing from left to right. And as my eyes were dragged towards it, my brain was enslaved, until I was more involved in monitoring the monitor than anything else that was going on.

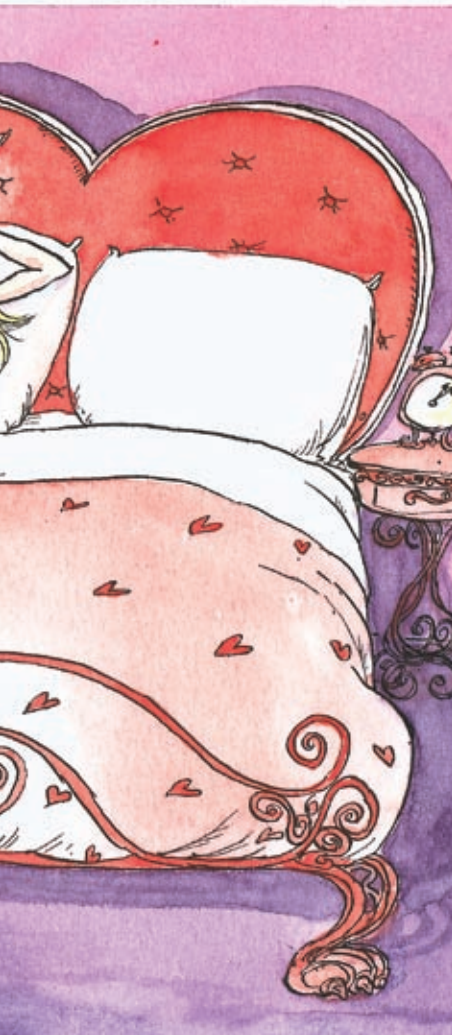
REMAINS OF THE DAY

These computerised visualisations of elapsed time consuming remaining time have removed all uncertainty, expectation and surprise. Great classical symphonies have been reduced to elapsed 'tracks' where none existed before. When I see that the movie on my DVD player has got only eight minutes to go, I know that the plot is about to be resolved, and in seven minutes' time the words "I love you, Dad/Mom/Lassie/

America," will be uttered by the moronic survivor.

And now it's the same with travel. My in-car navigation computer tells me exactly how many miles remain between me and my destination, and the frisson of being late or lost has been eliminated. I was flying over Afghanistan recently, but I wasn't looking out the window at the astounding scenery below. I was watching the video screen in front of me, where a progress bar chipped away at the distance to my destination imperceptibly slowly, while I was physically hurtling through the atmosphere at 570 miles an hour.

Now I have begun to view my own life in terms of an incremental progress bar. Shakespeare got it right when he identified the seven ages of man, except in his day, most folk never made it to track seven in the album of life, whereas these days senility lasts for most of side two. Soon I will hardwire my biometric ID card into my cerebral cortex, so I can spend all my time watching in fascination as my personal lifeline approaches my predictable death, instead of getting on with the random business of living.



MUD SLINGING



**SIMON EDWARDS
RAVES**

Being the switched-on, tuned-in industry analyst that I am, I can say with fair certainty that mobile phones are pretty popular. They are not gadgets, suitable only for the sort of geeks who swooned over calculator digital watches in the 80s. They are not even luxuries, owned by the super-rich with social lives comparable to that of Paris Hilton. They are a necessary part of modern life, as anyone who's tried to find a sanitary, working phone box, and then the necessary change, will agree.

These days, most people have a mobile. In fact, if you can believe the reports from some research companies, there are more mobile phones than people in the UK.

You can listen to analysts, whoever they are, bang on about market penetrations and other boring statistics, but I always find that you can locate the technological zeitgeist by using your parents as a benchmark. Does your father have an in-car satellite navigation system? If so, the chances are that sat nav is now an

essential item, rather than a silly executive toy.

My Dad has a mobile phone. It's the size of a brick, so it's not very mobile, and it's always switched off, so it's not much use as a phone. But he's doing his part to hold up our national statistics of mobile phone owners and support my argument, so I won't mock him.

In fact, he's making serious progress into the 21st century and has been sending email for years, though always with the subject field: From Dad. Mum has a mobile and can use a PC too, but prefers to handwrite notes for Dad to type into Outlook Express. He sends those with the subject: From Mum. No-one knows where her phone is.

LOOK, NO HANDS

My parents prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that mobile phones are essential devices. PDAs, on the other hand, are not. Sales have crashed. Initially, *Shopper* readers appear to buck the trend, with over 20 per cent owning a handheld PC, but only seven per cent want to buy a new one.

Phones are essentially designed to make and receive phone calls, which I'm sure you'll agree is another blistering insight. But if you think that's all they're for, we'll leave you to your Rolodex and Box Brownie. Phones have taken on the most important functions of a PDA and digital camera.

Last year I was forced to witness a naked mud-wrestling event at a stag do in Bratislava, and I couldn't help but notice that my fellow revellers reached for video-equipped mobile phones rather than camcorders. Some phones even had integrated spotlights, and many were able to capture footage at a surprisingly high resolution. Don't ask me why I was looking at the camera phones.

I don't believe that any of these guys made a conscious decision to bring a video camera with them. They didn't need to, because their phones were flexible enough to cater for any diversion, or perversion, as it arose.

Not one of them brought a television broadcasting van, but I'm sure that if their phones had made it simple and cheap, they would have beamed live, low-resolution images back to their local pubs in Britain, where the footage could be displayed on large screens.

SMART ARSE

Smartphones, the type of mobile phone that runs a compact version of Windows, are now very popular and, in my broadly generalising opinion, have signed the death warrant for PDAs. Why carry two

devices when your phone will also display video, take photos, play games and let you noodle around on the internet? It's a matter of time before phones routinely come with GPS and other features that PDA owners enjoy.

I've got a smartphone, and it's great. It cost me over £200 and I've broken it already, but it's the best phone I've ever owned. Not only does it synchronise properly with Outlook, but it has a version of Tetris on it. If you're interested, it's an iMate SP3i and the bit that's broken is the slightly unsuitable joystick on the front. It's actually more comfortable now it's busted, but those with less elf-like fingers might disagree.

Mobile phones are going to become even more interesting in the coming year. iMate is going to launch a service whereby you can access documents on your PC from anywhere using your smartphone. Another company, Mobiqu, has developed a ticket system that allows you to buy tickets for an event and have a barcode transmitted to your phone. The event's organiser scans this off your screen and allows you entry.

US company TextPayMe has an ingenious idea that I hope it will launch in the UK. Its service should remove the tedious and embarrassing scene that always develops when a group of people finish a meal at a restaurant.

No-one in this situation ever has the foresight to bring any real money with them, so you're left with a table full of people saying, "can you put my share on your card and I'll pay you back later". TextPayMe wisely assumes that even people without cash have a mobile phone and will allow people to make real-money transfers using text messages.

That means no more IOUs, and you can also use the system to request a money transfer – ideal for nagging tight-arse friends who "forget" to pay you back. Now all I need is to find a service that deals adequately with gits who say, "well, I just had a water and a salad, and she had wine and a pudding..."

JODIE THE BLOGGER



**SIMON EDWARDS
RANTS**

Jodie Marsh is many things. She is a glamour model, vegetarian, animal lover, supporter of anti-bully charity Beatbullying, previous contestant on the last series of *Celebrity Big Brother* and, most intriguingly, a voracious blogger. She doesn't have the most subtle taste in dress or make-up but, until

someone offers to pay me thousands for photographing me in my pants, I'm not really in a position to criticise her appearance. I am, however, willing to examine the wisdom of her postings.

Jodie's blog is a fascinating mixture of mundane repetition and wild, destructive mayhem, in much the same way as I imagine motorway watching could be. One day she will describe her new hairstyle or how she's worried that her pet dogs will pee on the floor of her new home. The next she lays into fellow celebrities and newspaper journalists with the kind of playground insults that are more likely to make her foes laugh than reach for a libel lawyer.

Typical examples include calling an editor a "feminist ginger bitch, ugly as sin"; referring suggestively to the fatal swimming pool incident at Michael Barrymore's home; and telling tales on ex-*Baywatch* star Traci Bingham by contacting an animal rights charity and complaining about Traci's contact with a fur coat.

BLOG OFF

This is precisely why blogs can be a bad thing. They make it easy to post opinions on the web quickly, without much forethought. I can't imagine that criticising fellow celebs and newspaper editors, or bothering charities with tattle, will make this celebrity's working life any easier in the near future.

It's the same with email. How easy is it to bash out a fast and furious response to someone, only to repent seconds later? You can't recall it once it's sent, and websites can live on in Google's cache and libel lawyers' hard disks for months after you delete them.

It may be that Jodie is a *Computer Shopper* reader, in which case I'll take this opportunity to advise her personally. If you're reading this, Jodie, remember that you are a popular celebrity. You might think that your website is read by only a handful of your friends, but the truth is that your messages make essential lunchtime reading for thousands, if not millions. Even my own humble website gets hundreds of hits each day, and I can assure you that there aren't any photos of me in a g-string available there. Not yet, anyway. Your website must be much more popular than mine so please, always think twice before posting, even if someone has put your nose out of joint.

As a victim of bullying in the past, you must know that it's not only sticks and stones that hurt. And sometimes your words can come back to haunt you. **ES**